

National Theatre of the Deaf

Public Testimony before Appropriations Committee

By Betty Beekman, Executive Director
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The National Theatre of the Deaf is proud to be one of Connecticut's theatres and be among one of Connecticut's Tony Award winning producing theatre companies. The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) is the longest existing touring theatre company in the United States, having toured and performed extensively throughout Connecticut, the nation, and the world for nearly 50 years.

The first year NTD toured was in 1967. 1967 was a time before close-captioned television, Deaf-friendly telephones, certified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, or equal rights for the Deaf. The Deaf community was invisible. It was common for the Deaf or Hard of Hearing individuals to be called "Deaf and Dumb." Deaf people were misunderstood, pitied, and feared. Their sign language was viewed as not being a language and inferior to the spoken word based on pantomime and gestures. This was the environment in which the NTD was born.

At first, the public struggled to understand the premise of NTD, thinking it a freak show or attended out of guilt and duty to see pitiable Deaf people perform. The NTD dynamically proved the capability from the very start as our actors performed at the height of professionalism, talent, beauty and strength. Shows were staged on artistic merit, transforming ASL into a new art form that we created and showing the capabilities and values of the Deaf. Our performance style combines language and art, and education and entertainment to leave a lasting impression on audiences. The NTD was like the first pebble dropped into a still pool, and we are still spreading our rings.

Our efforts and talents have travelled across the world, as we have been instrumental in starting professional, semi-professional and community theatre companies all over the globe. Most professional Deaf actors currently working on stage, screen and film have had training and/or have performed with NTD right here in Connecticut. Additionally, the NTD works with Deaf and Hearing students from primary school up through university through performances, residencies, workshops, and classes –and there are many layers to our work. Our workshop exercises and performances come with lessons of diversity, sensitivity, cultural awareness, additional perspective and change in perception of what is (or isn't) a handicap. The study of American Sign Language increases language richness and expands modes of self-expression. For the underserved Deaf population, the NTD offers important role modeling and pride in Deaf language, culture, talent and the beauty and depth of ASL expression.

The NTD helped overturn the negative perception of the Deaf in America and across the globe and it is with this mission in mind that we keep furthering our efforts. NTD is a unique company but is not exclusive to any one group or culture. NTD performs for all people whereby our audience may sit side-by-side enjoying the same performance at the same time and in the same way without accommodation or segregation. We sprung from an underserved population, and we serve all people through engaging, entertaining and

educating our audiences. By affecting our audiences, NTD proved and still proves its ability to be a catalyst for social change.

This past November NTD was chosen as the example to epitomize theatre arts, sign language and education in Japan. After our conference performance we had an audience with Japan's Imperial Princess and her daughter. In the program notes Mr. Osugi, who had viewed performances on previous tours to Japan, wrote: "The activities of the National Theatre of the Deaf contribute greatly to improving the situation for deaf people in the United States and in every country through promoting understanding for and popularization of sign language, and raising awareness for the wellbeing of the deaf. The theatre also emphasizes the importance for the deaf all over the world to take pride in themselves."

The NTD as a touring company has the unique ability to perform one night at the Kennedy Center and the next night in a school gymnasium. We perform in ballrooms, multi-purpose rooms, outdoor greens, and could probably perform in your front yard. We've performed all over the world in all types of venues, for royalty and for those who pass by on the street.

Our work in schools is multi-faceted: we preface and end our performances with extensive guide and workbook exercises which correspond with curriculum disciplines. Additionally, we teach awareness of an American-born culture and language that is little known, and we show diversity and social awareness. All this is accomplished at the same time providing solid theatrical entertainment.

In comparison with public schools, schools for the deaf are not given the same infusion of arts culture. When NTD enters schools, as well as those with mainstream programs, we provide Deaf students with the opportunity to see themselves reflected in our professional actors, Deaf like themselves, who become role models and widen one's self view. We aim to inspire and enthrall these students, to expose them to theatrical entertainment, literature, and the love of the arts –and to take pride in themselves and their language. Theatre and entertainment belong to everyone.

Theatre is the only collaborative art. Everyone participates. We, along, with the other funded state theatre anchor organizations are proud to have the support of Connecticut. We're proud of the work we've done by making our cities interesting, creating places to go, creating new works, entertaining and educating, inspiring new writers and actors; provide training and a place to grow. We, like Connecticut, are revolutionary. We're innovative and have the task to continually create something new for our audiences from everywhere, and from every walk of life.

It is our hope that funding will be reestablished not only to NTD but to those theatres here in Connecticut who have long served and worked hard for the citizens of Connecticut.

National Theatre of the Deaf Mission Statement And Organizational Summary

**By entertaining, educating, and engaging our audiences,
we change lives through the arts.**

Mission Statement

To present theatrical work of the highest quality, performing in the unique style we created through blending American Sign Language and spoken word.

In support of this mission, NTD:

- entertains, educates, and enlightens the general public, building bridges, opening their eyes and ears to Deaf culture;
- seeks, trains, and employs deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing artists;
- offers its work to culturally diverse and inclusive audiences through performances, workshops, training, and community outreach activities which facilitate involvement with our methods of work.

Organization Summary – Connecticut’s National Treasure

The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) entertains, educates, and enlightens a wide spectrum of audiences with its unique performance style that blends American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken word. This merging of sign and speech creates a visually rich, physical, and spatial art form that adds depth, meaning, and perception to traditional and original stage plays, and is accessible to deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing theatre-goers. Audiences are engaged through their imaginations and sensibilities by innovative artistic methods, and see and hear every word or concept, increasing appreciation for the performing arts and diverse cultures.

The NTD, established in 1967 at the Eugene O’Neill Memorial Theater Center, Waterford, CT, with the funding support of the U.S. Department of Education, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit tax-exempt professional theatre company. NTD has performed in 50 states and toured 7 continents, including 33 countries around the world, and has been hailed as a global ambassador. It is generally recognized as the first professional theatre company to integrate sign language and spoken word. NTD seeks out, trains, and employs deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing artists, providing a model for collaboration and harmony between diverse peoples and languages. This company provides outreach through performances, workshops, and residencies, providing viable life-long learning activities and appreciation of all peoples, languages, and cultures, including ASL and the Deaf community.